

Not Even Halfway Happy by TheMikeWheelers (jasongracefully)

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

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Summary:

AU where El convinced Hopper to let her go trick-or-treating in her ghost costume on Halloween night.

Not Even Halfway Happy

Eleven couldn't breathe.

There was oxygen all around her, and everyone else could breathe just fine, but Eleven was suffocating.

Her feet were glued to her spot, her entire body gone still, and she couldn't focus on anything besides the sight her eyes were fixed on across the street. The rest of the world had been drowned out.

She was somehow able to convince Hopper to let her go trick-or-treating, as long as she stayed covered at all times by the sheet of her ghost costume, and up until that point she'd been having a fun time. She got a ton of candy, and for the first time in so long she wasn't cooped up inside the cabin.

But then she saw them.

Right across the street, standing in the middle of the driveway, were her best friends.

Hopper's hand grabbed her shoulder, steadying her. She closed her eyes trying to take deep breaths. This was part of the deal she made. She could leave the cabin for one night, as long as she promised to stay hidden the whole time. No one could ever know it was her.

Earlier she was so eager to leave she would have agreed to anything, but now that the boys, her boys, were right there in front of her, she felt like all the breath had been sucked right out of her lungs. All the oxygen had escaped her body and flew through the air towards the four boys across the street, and the only way she could get it back was the face them and let them breathe her back to life.

"I know you want to see them, but the deal was no one sees you," Hop whispered into her ear quietly. His grip on her shoulder tightened, like he knew exactly what she was thinking, but El didn't care. She knew he would yell at her later and she was breaking her promise to stay away from them, but she had already broken so many promises to the boys. Maybe this would cancel out.

She used her powers to push his hand off her, and held his feet to the ground so he couldn't follow her. El ran down the driveway, desperate to see her friends again.

At this point they had seen her. They didn't know it was her, of course, but it was impossible not to notice the ghost running directly towards them. Dustin was the only one who didn't meet her in a confused scowl, instead jumping out and pointing some piece of his costume towards her.

"Hey, I caught you! Get in the proton pack!" He said with a laugh, waving up some box in his hands.

El had no idea what he was holding, but knew it was something to do with Ghostbusters. She hadn't been able to see the movie, for obvious reasons, but Mike told her all about it one night from the fort. When he mentioned that him and the guys were going as them for Halloween, El knew she had to be a ghost. She didn't think she would see them or anything, but she took some comfort in knowing that even if they couldn't be together for Halloween, at least their costumes would match.

El realized she had just been standing there, thinking back to the memory, instead of responding. Even Dustin now was gaining an uneasy expression at the apparent stranger in front of him. It was then that El noticed the girl standing between him and Lucas. She had fiery red hair that El had previously only ever seen from the stars on TV, and she was wearing some mask El couldn't recognize. Had the boys made a new friend?

Lucas stepped forward, getting more and more unsettled by the second, "Do we know you?"

El didn't answer, though she desperately wanted to. It was killing her, standing right there, so close to the boys for the first time in so long, but they still couldn't know it was her. It was unsafe, as Hopper said, though that made no sense to her whatsoever. But still, Hopper had been so strict with the rule, it had to be for a reason.

So instead of answering she just stood there, examining each of her friends before her. Dustin and the new girl were exchanging a

confused glance, and Dustin shrugged his shoulders. Lucas kept looking at her, expecting a response. Will was standing a few feet behind, inching backwards and looking at the ground, obviously the most uncomfortable with this weird interaction. And then her eyes landed on Mike.

His eyebrows were furrowed together watching her, scowling. He leaned over to whisper something to Will, and El couldn't exactly catch what he said, but it was something about, "Watch Lucas and Dustin invite them to join the party too."

El couldn't move. She was paralyzed to her spot watching Mike. She had seen him every night for the past year in the void, but it didn't compare to seeing him in person. His features weren't shrouded in darkness, she could make out each of the freckles dotted along his face, or the way his eyes gleamed with life. He didn't look very happy here, but at least he looked alive. El couldn't say the same for every other time she'd seen him for past 353 days. She just had to stand there and watch as Mike turned into this lifeless zombie.

More than anything she desperately wanted to tear off her sheet and let him see her. She wanted to run into his arms and hug him so tightly she would never have to let go again, to tell him how much she missed him and that she heard him every night and he was the only light to get her through this past year.

But she couldn't do any of that. She was stuck to her spot, and the boys couldn't know it was her.

"Mike, do you know this person?" Lucas turned towards him.

Mike raised his hands up in defense, "I don't even know who this is."

"Well they keep staring at you!"

El interrupted their banter by taking two steps forward. They fell silent to watch what she was doing.

Maybe the boys couldn't know it was her, but she'd be damned if she didn't get at least a moment with them after this whole year apart.

She turned towards Mike and stuck her hand out, waiting for him to

shake it. Mike's eyes narrowed in suspicion, but hesitantly he grabbed her hand.

The second she felt him touch her, El's heart began to race. It had been so long since she felt him. Every single time in the void she would try and reach out to him, to grab his hand or pull him into a hug, he would just disappear and drift away. Eventually El just stopped trying.

But this wasn't the void. Mike was actually here, in the flesh, right in front of her, and she was really touching him for the first time in so long. Electricity coursed through her veins, and her heart was beating so fast a small part of her was worried she was about to lose control of her powers, that the electricity would erupt from her fingertips and shock Mike. But El figured that wouldn't even be that bad of a scenario, though, at least then he would know it's her.

The last time she had touched him had been back in the science classroom, the night she left. He was squeezing into her hand so tightly, terrified to let go. El wondered if he'd be squeezing that tightly again if he knew it was her under the sheet.

Why didn't he recognize her hand? The sheet may have been covering most of her body, but a part of El felt betrayed that Mike couldn't tell it was her. Who else's hand would fit so perfectly into his? It was like they were made for each other, like his hand and her hand were just two parts of one whole. How could Mike not recognize the other half when he was currently shaking it and everything?

A guilty, selfish part of El was begging internally for Mike to turn over her arm and roll up her sleeves. *Please see my tattoo. Please see my tattoo.* The mantra repeated in her mind over and over again, desperate to somehow communicate it to Mike so he would know what to do, so he would know it was her.

But he didn't see her tattoo. And even if their hands were made for each other, Mike didn't notice just how perfectly this one fit into his. After a year of separation, they were now only one cut-up old bedsheet away from one another, but Mike had no way to know it was her.

He started to get more creeped out by just how long this handshake was going on, and he pulled away. El felt her heart shatter the second his hand disconnected from hers, it was like saying goodbye to him all over again. This was her first time having any real contact with him in almost a year, and now it was over. Tears welled up in her eyes. She tried to blink them away, but deep down she knew it didn't matter. It's not like he would see her cry after all.

The boys all started exchanging nervous glances. This stranger had still yet to say a single word to them, and it was giving them all goosebumps.

El couldn't stand it anymore. She wanted to run away, to go back to her desolate cabin and hide. Earlier she thought nothing could be worse than being stuck out there just waiting to see her friends again, but now her friends were right there in front of her, and she was realizing it was so much more painful to see them, but not be able to let them see her.

She turned away from the best friends she ever had, and without even being able to say goodbye, she started walking. Hop was waiting for her at the bottom of the driveway across the street, but she didn't stop to say anything, just storming past. She was done trick or treating. Halloween wasn't all it's cracked up to be.

Hopper was walking beside her in silence, leading her back to where his truck was parked so they could head home. El figured the second they were alone he'd start yelling at her, telling her not to be stupid and that she knew how dangerous it was to go up to them like that.

Frankly, El didn't care if she was being stupid. So what if it was stupid and dangerous and every other word Hopper had said to her for the last year every time she asked about seeing her friends? She just saw them, and it was the stupidest thing she'd ever done. She should have known this was an awful idea and it would only be painful and she wouldn't be able to handle seeing them but not letting them see her. She didn't need Hopper to lecture her on how stupid that was, she knew exactly how stupid she was being. The tears in her eyes and the ache in her chest was proof of that.

When they got to the truck, El plopped herself down in the passenger

seat, ripping off her sheet, wishing she could tear it into pieces with how much she hated that goddamn costume.

Her tears were pouring out now, she couldn't control them. She couldn't breathe, and for the second time that night it was like all the oxygen had been sucked out of her lungs, she was gasping for air. But this time it was like the oxygen had been replaced with water. She was drowning, she could feel her lungs fill up and her heart burned in pain. El thought she was about to get physically sick. This was what missing her friends was doing to her

Surprisingly, Hopper didn't yell at her. He didn't lecture her or say anything. He just leaned over and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her into his chest. Her sobs were drowned out as she planted her face into his shirt, and he rubbed her arm, wishing there was anything he could do.

"Someday you'll be able to see them for real. It'll be soon, I promise."

He pulled her deeper into his chest, his own heart shattering at the sight of her like this.

"Things will get better soon."